SABLE AND PURPLE

WILLIAM WATSON

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SABLE
AND PURPLE

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WITH OTHER POEMS

BY

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SABLE AND PURPLE

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I

I sing not Death. Death is too great a thing
For me to dare to sing.
I chant the human goodness, human worth,
Which are not lost, but sweeten still the Earth ;
The things that flee not with the upyielded
breath,
But, housed in sanctuary of simple hearts,

Live undethroned when Death

Comes to the chamber of a mighty King,

And sheds abroad the silence of his wing,

Then shakes his raven plumage, and departs.

II

Honour the happy dead with sober praise,
Who living would have scorned the fulsome
phrase,
Meet for the languorous Orient's jewelled ear.
This was the English King, that loved the English
ways :
A man not too remote, or too august,
For other mortal children of the dust
To know and to draw near.
Born with a nature that demanded joy,
He took full draughts of life, nor did the vintage
cloy ;

But when she passed from vision, who so long
Had sat aloft—alone—
On the steep heights of an Imperial throne,
Then rose he large and strong,
Then spake his voice with new and grander tone,
Then, called to rule the State
Which he had only served,
He saw clear Duty plain, nor from that highway
swerved,
And, unappalled by his majestic fate,
Pretended not to greatness, yet was great.

III

Sea-lover, and sea-rover, throned henceforth
Amid the paths and passes of the sea ;
You that have sailed, out of our stormy North,
And have not sailed in vain,
To all the golden shores where now You reign,
Through every ocean gate whereof You keep the
key :
O may your power and your dominion stand
Fixt on what things soever make Life fair,
And on what things soever make men free,
In duteous love of ordered liberty :

So shall your praise be blown from strand to strand.

Your Father lies among the Kings his kin,

Pillowed on yonder couch of silence, where

No wandering echo of the world's loud blare

Profanes the awesome air.

The age that bore us is entombèd there !

With You the younger time is eager to begin.

Let nations see, beneath your prospering hand,

An Empire mighty in arms, its fleets and hosts

Keeping far vigil round your hundred coasts—

An Empire mighty in arms, but therewithal

Nourished in mind, with noble thoughts made rich,

And panoplied in knowledge, lacking which

The proudest fortress is but feebly manned
And ever trembles to its thunderous fall.
And now to You—to Her who at your side
Henceforward shall divide
The all but dreadful glory of a crown—
Be honour and felicity and renown !
And may the inscrutable years,
That claim from every man their toll of tears,
Weave for your brows a wreath that shall not fade—
A chaplet and a crown divinely made
Out of your people's love, your people's trust ;
For wanting these all else were but as dust
In that great balance wherein Kings are weighed.

KING ALFRED

KING ALFRED

Alfred the Great, in his Palace at Winchester, drawing near to his last days, talks with Asser the Welshman.

ALFRED

Asser, good bishop and well-proven friend,
Thou find'st me changed and stricken low by mine
Infirmities ; not much of warrior left ;
Here feebly sitting, pierced with many nails
Of pain. And in my flesh there is a voice
That telleth me my days henceforth are few.

ASSER

Thou art not old.

ALFRED

No son of Ethelwulf
Grows old. Nor have I held it to be aught
A King should murmur at, if life burn down
Untimely, whether amid toilful peace
Or shaken with the blast and peal of war.
But to go hence, unsure if what I wrought
And moulded be more lasting than the abode
Yon swallow builds, out of a little clay,
And lines with feathers!

ASSER

King, thou hast set good trees
In a good soil, where now with fruit they bless
Thy planting——

ALFRED

And anon there shall return
The Northern storm that I have stayed awhile,
And shatter my young woods, ev'n as the old.

ASSER

Think not so ill of ages yet to be!
The wicked may again wax proud, but men's
Devices stand not, against God's resolves;
And that which He hath helped the just to build,
Surely He will not help the unjust to raze.
Leave now to Him the Shall-be: the Hath-been,
Behold it comely to look back upon—
A tale of enemies mightily withstood,
And dangers greatly wrestled with and thrown;
A tale told at the hearth on winter eves,
And dear to earl and churl and thane and thrall
For ever.

ALFRED

Friend, I thank thee for thy word.
It may be that my thoughts are not more hale
Than this worn body. And most unmeet it were,
If I, that have from God riches and power,
Gave not at last, unto my Over-King,

Aught but a joyless heart. Nay, go not yet.
Here sit thou, where this window looketh out
Upon the quiet world in which I end,
Who lacked not stir of camps and din of arms.
Yonder my city twinkles in the sun,
Beneath the down: ev'n she whom those dim minds
In shining mail, the heathen Kings, did lay
In ashes,—there she riseth, and the light
Gildeth her towers. And here we have sat—how oft!—
And talked of happy or of woful things
That have befall'n my people.

ASSER

But to-day,
Shall we not rather count the woful things
As tares and darnel sown among the wheat,—
Nay, as the ills that being outlived are good,—
And talk henceforth of happy things alone?

Such as that famous pleasantry of thine,
When Hasting with his ships lay in the Lea,
And thou did'st lure the stream out of his course——

ALFRED

Out of his ancient bed!

ASSER

His well-loved bed!

ALFRED

And brought him through strange byways to the Thames——

ASSER

And left the Northman's navy high and dry.

ALFRED

Yea, bishop, 'twas a goodly jest. But Thought
Needeth no spur to bid him carry me
Far unto rearward of the time whereof

Thou speakest ; and when sleep is rife with dreams,
Oft in old warfare am I tossed anew.
Then shapes come wandering from my battlefields,
And ruthless Kings sail out of Heathendom,
Whose keels were the swift ploughshares of the sea,
Who tilled not earth, save with the harrow of war.
Again the Dane meets me in truce, again
Swears on his arms, and on the holy ring
Makes covenant, pledging him to go in peace
From out my realm that he so sore had bruised,
And I again am fooled and he forsworn.
And now I lurk in thickets, fade from sight
In the rank steaming marsh, am lost to men
Amid the tusks and antlers of the brake,
A hunted hunter, nameless, on the isle
Of hiding ; and there cometh thither,—borne,
It well might seem, on some lone heron's wing,—
Word of the gladsome slaying of Ubba, amidst
His hungry sea-wolves, nigh the hungry sea
That clangs on northern Devon ; and there falls

Into our hands that thing of sorcery, made
In likeness of their fabled Odin's bird,
The Raven War-flag, woven to the sound
Of old enchantments in one Christless noon
By the three daughters born to Lodbrok, him
Of thrice dread name and doom, whom snakes
devoured.
Yea, and at times, swept in a hurtling dream,
Again I smite the host at Ethandune,
And drive them flying before me to their hold,
With crash of battle-axe through scalp and skull,
And hewing of great limbs as boughs lopped off
When thunder hurls him on the cringing weald.

ASSER

Too much the memory stirs thy frame.

ALFRED

And yet
The Northman's joy in battle for battle's sake
Was never mine! Nor was I of that stuff

The tamers and subduers of the earth
Are made of. I had turned with a sick soul
From their red havoc ; from things and deeds whereat
Warriors like Alexander when he trode
On Persia, boasting him begotten of Jove,—
Or Genseric—or the great Hamilcar's sons—
Or Shalmaneser and Sargon in their pride,—
Would with a smile have gazed : the sack of towns ;
The spear thrust through the tender breast of babes ;
And deeds I name not, but which they that sailed
Against me—as the gleeman singeth it,
Over the gannet's bath and whale's domain—
Held lighter than the moulted feather a gull
Gives to the wind, and as the things of nought
That in their sum were glory and conqueror's fame.
I ever looked beyond the sword-mown field
To other harvest. For in this my realm,
Which I but hold in fief and vassalage
From One more mighty, of more ancient throne,

A King's most King-like, most King-worthy toil
Begins, not ends, when he hath builded him
A bulwark 'gainst his foes. Then comes the task
Of rearing for his people such a house
That they within, for fiery love of it,
Shall leap as a lion if enemy threat their door.
And being athirst to see this realm of mine,
This house and mansion that my hands have reared,
Full of fair things, I sent to richer lands
For what mine own was poor in, bearing thence
Much honourable booty, and chief of all,
Their wisdom, as set forth in script and scroll;
With divers other noble spoils of peace.
For I did grieve to think how these rough coasts,
That all too often have let in the foe,
Should be so apt at keeping out the friend,
Him that hath gifts for us, right worthy word
And highborn thought; or skill to raise aloft
Minsters that usher into heaven the mind;
Or music, of such sort that while it peals

In a man's breast, no baseness there can live.
And greatly had it pleased me to have seen
My people hotter in the love of song,
And of that sweetest craft of song-making ;
For they are come of them that dearly prized
The word of the skilled makers, those old chants
Our pagan fathers graved in runes, on what
They in their darkness held the sacred beech.
Perhaps another age shall more abound
In song-fruit, when perhaps another King
Shall have less lust of it than I. Howbeit,
I leave my people not unfed in mind,
Whom pinched I found, and lean ; and I bequeath
A land healed of her wounds : where pillage was,
Is tillage, and the fruit is sweet, the flower
Is fair. But pray thou that there come not back
The trampler of my orchard and my field,
To fill the wheel-tracks of his wain with blood.

ASSER

King, in my land, beyond the Severn sea,
They tell of one, a soothsayer, that lived,
As I conceive, betwixt that time when Rome
Called hence the legions, and the days when sat
Theodoric at Ravenna with his Goths;
And of this sage, or wizard, whom they name
Merlin, 'tis written that he prophesied
Of thee—"*The north wind shall against him rise,*
And blight his flowers, the west wind's fosterlings."
The dark word was fulfilled: the north wind came
And snatched away thy blooms. Now is he stayed;
Now hast thou set a bound to the north wind.
Comfort thee, then, and be of a glad heart,
For He is on thy side who was of old
On Hezekiah's, when Sennacherib's host
With thunder of chariots was come up against
Judah, and by the mouth of Amoz' son

The Lord spake, saying, "I will put My hook
In his nostrils, and My bridle in his lips,
And I will turn him back by the way he came."

[*A minstrel is heard singing.*]

Forth unto warfare
Rode they and strode they,
Lordly and low-born,
Etheling and hind.

There, by the oakwood,
Hewed they the heathen,
The north wind's brood, whose
Nest was the sea.

There, as a reed-bed
In west wind rustling,
Shivered the fear-swept
Hearts of the foe.

Now were their wounded
Weary and war-sad,
Kings with their kindred
From battle-stead borne.

Now were their spear-men
Taken and spared not :
Death-sickle reaped them :
Swift fell the swathes.

Lagged not the ravens,
Flying to flesh-fare :
Blithe came the war-kites,
Glad the grey wolves.

Drinkless and dry-lipped
Had earth been at dayspring :
Slaughter-cup slaked her,
Long ere the eve.

ALFRED

There, Asser, sang the sword. Nor is it for me,
Who all my life have known no peace but such
As ever listens for the step of war,
To call that voice unholy. Hatred, too,
And rage, are paths God leads us by, to ends
We understand not. . . . But the day burns low,
And the light fadeth upon turret and spire.
Bidest thou here to-morrow ?

ASSER

I depart
To Sherborne, thy fair town that climbs about
Its minster, where my pastoral staff now lacks
The shepherd. There thy brother Ethelbert
Awaiteth resurrection with the just.

ALFRED

There, also, lieth another of my house——

ASSER

Less worthy to have been of Egbert's seed.

ALFRED

His sins were great ; but let him rest in peace . . .
It may be we shall talk not here again.

ASSER

It may be. For the time is not far off—
Wherefore should I dissemble at this hour ?—
When from the prison of the body thou
Shalt be delivered ; and shalt give to earth
That which from earth thou hadst ; and yield to God
That which thou hadst indeed from God alone.

ALFRED

Friend, thou didst ever serve me faithfully :
So serve thou him that ruleth when I cease,
Edward my son.

[A strange light suffuses the chamber. Alfred sinks on his knees.]

Behold, I see him great
And mighty, at his feet submitted thrones . . .
And after him another mightier yet . . .
And then, dim forms at strife . . . beyond them, crown
And crozier warring . . . and deeds of hell . . . and now
Glory and power new-stablished . . . and again
Blind welter, and the brood of dire misrule . . .
A groaning people, a sundering realm. . . . Ah, Lord
Of Heaven! in mercy show Thou me no more.

IN THE MIDST OF THE SEAS

IN THE MIDST OF THE SEAS

To my Wife

I

Let them not dream that they have known the ocean
Who have but seen him where his locks are spread
'Neath purple cliffs, on curving beaches golden ;
Who have but wandered where his spume is shed
On those dear Isles where thou and I were bred,
Far Britain, and far Ierne ; and who there,
Dallying about his porch, have but beholden

The fringes of his power, and skirts of his commotion,
And culled his voiceful shells, and plucked his ravelled hair.

II

Beloved! the life of one brief moon hath sped,
No more than one brief moon, since thou and I
To chilly England waved a warm good-bye.
On glooming tides the great ship rode,
The great ship with her great live load.
The famous galleons of old Spain,
The prows that were King Philip's pride,
Had seemed, against her mighty side,
Things of derision and disdain.
Out from Mersey's flashing mouth,
In a night of cloud and dolorous rain,
Darkly, darkly bore she south.

In a morn of rising wind and wave
She rounded the isle of Old Unrest,
And out into open Atlantic drave,
Till all the rage of all the wild south-west
Unmasked its thundering batteries 'gainst her
populous breast.

III

Many have sung of the terrors of Storm ;
I will make me a song of its beauty, its graces of hue
and form ;
A song of the loveliness gotten of Power,
Born of Rage in her blackest hour,
When never a wave repeats another,
But each is unlike his own twin brother,
Each is himself from base to crown,
Himself alone as he clambers up,
Himself alone as he crashes down ;—

IN THE MIDST OF THE SEAS

When the whole sky drinks of the sea's mad cup,
And the ship is thrilled to her quivering core,
But amidst her pitching, amidst her rolling,
Amidst the clangour and boom and roar,
Is a Spirit of Beauty all-controlling!
For here in the thick of the blinding weather
The great waves gather themselves together,
Shake out their creases, compose their folds,
As if each one knew that an eye beholds.
And look! there rises a shape of wonder,
A moving menace, a mount of gloom,
But the moment ere he breaks asunder
His forehead flames into sudden bloom,
A burning rapture of nameless green,
That never on earth or in heaven was seen,
Never but where the midmost ocean
Greets and embraces the tempest in primal divine emotion.
And down in a vale of the sea, between
Two roaring hills, is a wide smooth space,

Where the foam that blanches the ocean's face
Is woven in likeness of filmiest lace,
Delicate, intricate, fairy-fine,
Wrought by the master of pure design,
Storm, the matchless artist, and lord of colour and line.

IV

And what of the ship, the great brave vessel,
Buffeted, howled at, patient, dumb,
Built to withstand, and manned to wrestle,
Fashioned to strive and to overcome ?
She slackens her pace, her athlete speed,
Like a bird that checks his ardent pinion ;
She husbands her strength for the day of her need,
But she thrusts right on through her salt dominion ;
She staggers to port, she reels to starboard,
But weathers the storm and lives it down ;
And one chill morning beholds her harboured
Under the lee of the great chill town.

V

New York! a city like a chessboard made,
Whereon the multitudinous pawns are swayed
Neither by Knight nor puissant Queen,
And bow not unto Castle or King,
Yet hither and thither are moved as though they obeyed,
Half loath, some power half seen,
Some huge, voracious, hundred-headed thing,
Armed with a million tentacles, whereby
He hooks and holds his victims till they die.
There did we tarry, dearest! But one day
There came on us a longing to go forth,
No matter whither, so 'twere far away!
Then from the snarl and bite of the sharp North
To Florida's sweet orange-flaming shore,
Through forests and savannahs vast we sped,
And found a sea so fair and strange, we said—

"We have but dreamed of splendour heretofore."
For all the sky-line was an emerald ring
Of such deep glow as baulks imagining ;
And all the tide within it, streak on streak,
Was one extravagant revel and freak
Of amber and amethyst, azure and smouldering
red,
With every hue that is the child of these
Dancing at noon on the fantastic seas.

VI

So for a little while we roamed
In a golden, gorgeous land o'erdomed
With throbbing and impassioned skies ;
A palmy land of dusky faces
Meek before the mastering races—
Ebony faces and ivory teeth,
And liquid, kindly, patient eyes,

With laughter lurking underneath.
Then we took ship and landed here
In old Havana. The old year,
Sinking fast, hath not yet died,
And here we have spent our Christmas-
tide,
And once in a while can just remember
It is not August, but December.
And here last night (Canst thou believe
That five days hence 'twill be New Year's
Eve ?)
Here, in this Yule of flaming weather,
Hotter than solstice on English heather,
There broke from out the unfathomed sky
Lightning such as thou and I
Never beheld unsheathed in the fervour of
mid-July.
All night long, with many an elvish antic,
Violet fire lit up the dazzled land ;
All this morn the weight of all the Atlantic

Fell in thunder on the coral strand.
Come—for not yet subsides the mighty roar :
Come—the whole sea invites us to the shore.

VII

Ah, dear one ! can it be
That thou and I have eaten of that herb
Whereof 'tis writ that whosoever tastes
Can ne'er again his lust of wandering curb,
But day and night he hastes
From sea to land, and on from land to sea,
With vain desires that beckon and perturb
His heart unrestingly ?
Nay, we have roved just far enough to know
That we possess too little wealth to rove,
Being poor in lucre, though
Exceeding rich in love.
Yet travel hath taught us lessons we scarce had
learned in repose ;

Our friends have been proven our friends, and our
foes have been proven our foes.
And having seen and pondered much, some visions
we surrender,
And return a little weary, for a little taste of ease,
From tempest and from hurricane, and a land of
light and splendour,
And the odorous thrones of summer in the midst
of the seas.

Vedado,
Havana, Cuba
December 1909

THE THREATENED TOWERS

THE THREATENED TOWERS

Nay, if we did in truth desire
That what we built should fall,
Were *theirs* the voice to bid us fire
The roof, and mine the wall ?

Let the wild wave, that would submerge
All ancient things and great,
With hoarse and ineffectual surge
Break on the towers of State.

The ages, pondering at their toil,
Welded this stone and lime,
And no rash hands of haste shall foil
The slow, wise thoughts of Time.

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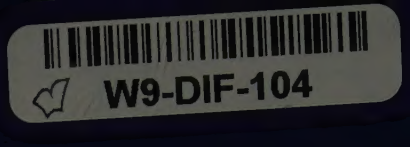
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